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NOTEWORTHY POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

(Editor's Note: These items, produced for another CIA publication, do not deal specifically with the international narcotics situation. They are included here, however, because they concern developing political or economic situations that could impact on the international narcotics control effort.)

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GUATEMALA: The Pressures of Burgeoning Political Violence

Guatemala is experiencing an upsurge in political violence that is symptomatic of, if not directly attributable to, the coming presidential election. Typically, radical groups believe that forcing the administration to declare a state of siege and suspend the election will foster public dissatisfaction and political chaos, enabling them to build popular support. President Laugerud, despite mounting public and personal pressures, seems determined to keep security forces in line and hold the election as scheduled on 5 March.

Aside from the abduction of several wealthy businessmen last fall, the two spectacular kidnapings last month by Guatemala's largest terrorist group, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), are the first major incidents of political violence in the election campaign. They once again impressively demonstrate the daring as well as the substantial capabilities of the EGP to act throughout most of the country.

On 13 December, the EGP kidnaped and killed Luis Canella, a prominent businessman and member of the President's Council of State. On 31 December, it kidnaped Roberto Herrera Ibarguen who was Minister of Government and Minister of Foreign Relations under former President Arana, Laugerud's predecessor. Herrera is currently vice president of Laugerud's Council of State, a member of Guatemala's Belize negotiating team, a wealthy businessman, and a close personal friend of the President.

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The EGP, which claims that Herrera organized and directed government "death squads" in the early 1970s, demanded wide media dissemination of its propaganda and $2.5 million in ransom in exchange for Herrera's release. The government and the Herrera family apparently complied with the demands. According to one press report from Guatemala, Herrera has been released.

President Laugerud would like to leave office with his comparatively good human rights record intact, but he is under considerable pressure from rightists and businessmen to crack down on the terrorists. Although he has called for stronger measures to combat violence, including the death penalty for kidnaping, he has publicly asserted that he will not impose a state of siege.

Last week, Laugerud called on the three presidential candidates to confer with him on ways to discourage campaign violence. Former President Enrique Peralta Azurdia, candidate of the conservative National Liberation Movement, showed up, but the other two candidates did not. Fernando Lucas, the semiofficial candidate, was late returning from a trip to Venezuela, while the Christian Democratic candidate, Ricardo Peralta Mendez, refused to attend unless the press was permitted to participate. Cooperation by the political parties would help ease campaign violence, but in the absence of a government crackdown, terrorist incidents are likely to continue.

Even so, the election will probably come off as scheduled, and the cycle will play itself out with the level of violence declining after the new president assumes office in July. A tangential but major implication of the latest kidnaping is that it distracted Laugerud from the Belize issue. His attention is critical now if a settlement is to be achieved this year, since he will become a lame duck President in just seven weeks.

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